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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ASHGABAT 001443

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR SCA/CEN, DEPT FOR SCA/PPD

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/10/2019

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [SOCI](#) [TX](#)

SUBJECT: NOVEMBER 10 MEETING WITH DEPUTY CHAIRMAN SAPARLYEV
ON EDUCATIONAL ISSUES

REF: ASHGABAT 1228 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: Charge Sylvia Reed Curran, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY. On November 10 Charge met with Deputy Chairman for Education, Health, Sciences, and Religion Hydyr Saparlyev. They discussed ongoing problems with TASP, the Peace Corps, and other educational exchange programs. Saparlyev indicated a desire to resolve the various problems while adhering to the party-line that "there aren't any real problems." After hearing that the U.S. was prepared to raise these issues with President Berdimuhamedov, Saparlyev expressed a renewed desire to "work on these topics." END SUMMARY.

12. (C) The meeting, held at Saparlyev's office at the Cabinet of Ministers, was attended on the Turkmen side by Saparlyev, Minister of Education Gulshat Mammedova, and MFA America's Desk Director Serdar Bashimov. The American side consisted of Charge, PAO, Peace Corps Acting Country Director, and a translator.

A PARTNERSHIP MEANS WORKING TOGETHER TO SOLVE PROBLEMS

13. (C) After introductory pleasantries, the Charge began the meeting by outlining her understanding that we have a partnership in the field of education. As in any partnership, there are sometimes problems, and it is necessary to work together to resolve them. She noted that in the sphere of education several of our programs currently are facing significant problems.

IF BERDI SAYS SOMETHING, SHOULDN'T IT HAPPEN?

14. (C) Charge outlined the as-yet unresolved obstacles facing students in the Turkmen American Scholarship Program (TASP). She said that the USG had listened to the concerns of the GOTX and had transferred all of the students from the American University in Central Asia (AUCA) to the American University in Bulgaria (AUBG). The students had been accepted at AUBG, had received Bulgarian visas, and had all of the necessary stamps and documents from the Turkmen Ministry of Education (MOE) and Ministry of Defense. The issue had even been raised between Secretary Clinton and President

Berdimuhamedov. The Turkmen President said that he was fine with the students studying in Bulgaria. Nevertheless, the students were still unable to leave the country. The USG is wondering why the students haven't been able to leave. Charge pointed out that the President is the most powerful and important person in Turkmenistan, and that when he says something the USG expects that his words will be fulfilled.

PEACE CORPS - A POSSIBLE SOLUTION

15. (C) Charge then moved to the recent delay of the newest group of Peace Corps volunteers. She noted the many instances that President Berdimuhamedov had praised the work of the Peace Corps, including his specific mention of the topic in New York, during his meeting with Secretary Clinton. She expressed the USG's surprise when, shortly following UNGA, we received a dipnote from the GOTX stating how it would be inappropriate for the 16th group of volunteers to arrive in October 2009. She reiterated that the USG had never heard of any problems with the program or with this specific group of volunteers and expressed a desire to learn the reason behind the delay so as to avoid future problems. She mentioned a proposal to have 20 of the volunteers arrive in March 2010 to work in the health realm, and have 20 more English language teachers arrive in June to prepare for the fall start of school. (NOTE: Prior to the meeting, Acting Peace Corps Country Director informed Charge of the above proposal that his headquarters said could be offered. END NOTE.)

DELAYS IN EXCHANGE PROGRAM APPROVALS

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16. (C) Charge described the delays in GOTX approval for several of the Embassy's educational exchange programs, including the Future Leaders Exchange (FLEX) program. She expressed surprise at the delays in approving FLEX this year especially given the recent positive media coverage of FLEX during Berdimuhamedov's visit to New York, and the visibly positive effects of the program on participants and on our bilateral relations. She underlined how FLEX allows Turkmen students to serve as ambassadors of Turkmen culture to their host families and friends, and how it truly is a program with great value. After discussing FLEX, Charge outlined a list of the various USG educational exchange programs and how they benefit U.S.-Turkmen bilateral relations.

17. (C) Charge expressed the USG's desire to work together on these programs, underlying our desire to identify and solve problems to our mutual benefit. She underscored the U.S. desire to hear about problems or GOTX concerns in advance so that we could solve them before they begin to affect our relationship. She finished by expressing her desire to report back to Washington that our education programs are on-track and moving forward.

18. (C) Saparlyev responded by expressing his gratitude for the USG's involvement in the educational sphere and his general assessment that all of the programs are working, including those run by American Councils (ACCELS), IREX, and the Embassy directly. He also underscored his appreciation of the Charge's commitment to working together and not unilaterally to implement these programs.

SAPARLYEV - EVERYTHING IS FINE WITH THE PEACE CORPS

19. (C) Saparlyev then turned his focus to the Peace Corps, explaining that there are currently 43 volunteers working in Turkmenistan (referring to them as "our" volunteers). He thanked the Charge for her suggestion and stated that "we would need to work on that proposal and think about this." He said the Ministry of Education was working on placements for the 50 volunteers. It would only be beneficial for the volunteers to arrive when "we know what they will be doing, where they will be living, and who will be working with

them." He said that the MOE would need to prepare for their arrival, including arranging proper working and living conditions for them. He ended by reiterating that the Peace Corps has worked for years in Turkmenistan at a typical level of about 60 volunteers and that today's 43 volunteers falls well within that range. (NOTE: There are currently 70 PCVs in country, but there will be only 37 when the oldest group leaves later this year. END NOTE.)

SAPARLYEV - "THERE ARE NO LIMITS WHATSOEVER ON TURKMEN STUDENTS GOING ABROAD"

¶10. (C) Saparlyev then shifted focus by detailing the "unprecedented number of Turkmen students studying abroad," with over 16,000 Turkmen students at universities throughout the world on a variety of government, business and private programs. He stated that "there are no limits whatsoever on Turkmen students going abroad," but that the Ministry of Education does sometimes "assist and help students to make sure they choose properly when going abroad." He explained further that the Ministry of Education is responsible for ensuring that students study "appropriate fields and specialties" at recognized institutions that would then allow them to find employment when they return. He also explained that the Ministry of Education is responsible for ensuring that the "proper and correct normative agreements and documents are in place" between governments and institutions that are necessary to "regulate relations."

¶11. (C) Saparlyev used the topic of proper regulations to turn his focus to TASP by explaining that "we did not have the proper regulations and agreements, hence we had certain

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difficulties" with the students going to Kyrgyzstan. He said the USG and GOTX should review all of these programs together in order to ask the proper questions and make the correct decisions. He finished his remarks by noting that "there are no difficulties, we just need to make sure we coordinate our work better."

CHARGE ATTEMPTS TO CLARIFY ON TASP AND PEACE CORPS

¶12. (C) Charge thanked Saparlyev for his remarks, and added that she would like to make a few short comments in response. She thanked Saparlyev for his willingness to consider our proposal on the Peace Corps volunteers, at which point Saparlyev interjected that "we've already agreed to accept the 50 volunteers in September." Charge responded that the 50 specific volunteers that had been delayed were no longer planning on coming to Turkmenistan but had all been reassigned to other places. She reiterated her earlier proposal of 20 new volunteers arriving in March and 20 more in June.

TALKING DIRECTLY TO BERDI

¶13. (C) Charge said there are many Turkmen students at institutions where there is no formal agreement. She then focused specifically on TASP by stating that "for many months now we have not talked about Kyrgyzstan and AUCA," and reiterated that "these students are not going there, they have been accepted to and are going to Bulgaria." She stressed that the USG is perplexed as to why the President's word does not seem to have been implemented in this instance and raised the potential of raising the issue directly with President Berdimuhamedov.

SAPARLYEV - "LET'S WORK ON THAT (TASP) ISSUE TOGETHER"

¶14. (C) At the mention of Berdimuhamedov, Saparlyev responded "let's work on that issue together." He offered a half-hearted excuse that "potentially, maybe with regard to Bulgaria, not all of the documents were completely agreed-upon and coordinated with the Ministry of Education, but we should agree on these things in advance next time."

¶15. (C) Charge thanked Saparlyev for his commitment to review these topics and expressed the USG's hope for rapid approval of the programs and proposals discussed. Saparlyev agreed that "both sides can work better on these topics," and underlined President Berdimuhamedov's commitment to education and promised that "we will continue to fulfill all the orders of our President." Charge raised the topic of a planned Department of Agriculture educational exchange that would allow two U.S. professors to teach at the Turkmen Institute of Agriculture. Saparlyev immediately recognized the program and said that "we are working on it, and may have already provided an answer to these questions. I'll look into over the next day or two."

¶16. (C) COMMENT: It seems that when faced with the threat of the USG going directly to Berdimuhamedov on TASP, the Peace Corps and other issues, Saparlyev backed down and expressed a desire to resolve these issues "together." He is never going to admit that mistakes were made, but it now seems clear that he was acting on his own in continuing to delay U.S. educational programs. After today's meeting, it seems possible that several of these issues could be resolved in the near future. END COMMENT.

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